The gates of Heaven are large, impressive, and generally regarded by all to be the main entrance into and out of Heaven. There are other gates, almost as equally impressive with columns made of pearl and gold and silver, but not a single one of those gates had the delicate construction of jade and pearl that the main gate had.

Gabriel, much as he would have liked to leave by any of those gates, knew better than to depart through them. They were too heavily guarded, and the actions of any angels of his rank drew attention.

Gabriel, however, knew something about the layout of Heaven that not many angels did: Heaven was not surrounded by walls, not on certain layers, and that was why certain patrols were required, and that was why Gabriel descended from Shamayim (First Heaven) down to Araboth (Seventh Heaven) where there were few walls.

It didn't take him long to spirit himself to the border, and it didn't take him long to leave Heaven from there.

There was only one complication.

Castiel flies his patrol alone, as his wings carry him along its route faster than any angel in his garrison, and his superiors are not fools enough to slow him with a second angel.

He is alone when he spots an angel moving swiftly out of Heaven, and so he makes a judgement call and drops into a dive, pulling out of it barely feet away from the other angel.

It is a loud and attention-grabbing way of landing, and it works. Castiel touches down to see Gabriel startling and halting his movements.

"Gabriel," Castiel says, honestly surprised to see the archangel here. "Forgive me."

Gabriel doesn't answer him for long moments, not before showing the slumping of his shoulders. "Castiel, you're too good at this for your own good."

Castiel does not understand.

"I didn't want to deal with this," Gabriel mutters, and he drops his head. A moment passes, then he raises his eyes and affixes Castiel with a hard stare. "Castiel, you're not to tell anyone that I was here. Not Uriel, not Abdiel, *no one*."

Castiel still does not understand, but orders are orders, and he is not to question his orders.

"Yes, Gabriel."

"Right, then," Gabriel is agitated, and Castiel can see new lines of tenseness on his face. Castiel can also see the exact moment Gabriel comes to a decision. "Come closer, Castiel. I'll make this easier for you."

Castiel closes the gap between them, comes closer. He wants to ask, to question: *Why am I coming closer? Make what easier? What are you doing here?* but he cannot, will not ask.

Then Gabriel has a hand on his neck, one cupping his face and Castiel is dragged into a kiss. Castiel doesn't know *what* to do, so he holds still, lets Gabriel taste his lips and mouth before Gabriel's hand has left Castiel's face and landed much, much lower on Castiel's body.

The sensation is sudden and new, and Castiel gasps into Gabriel's mouth, hips pushing forward into the spark of pleasure.

"You won't thank me for this later, kid," Gabriel murmurs into the kiss, stroking Castiel's crotch. "You might understand, but right now..." Castiel cuts him off with another kiss, already wanting more.

Gabriel moans into Castiel's mouth, surprised, and Castiel sees vague recognition in Gabriel's eyes before Gabriel pushes him back, down to the ground, and their clothes are gone, turned into air when Gabriel pumps his cock, fast and firm.

Castiel cries out, wanting *more*, and he has no defense, none at all against the pleasure and the craving for more. All he knows is that it feels good, better than anything he's felt physically before, and all he can think of is what it feels like to be flying high and hard and dropping into dives and practicing complicated aerial maneuvers on his own.

Gabriel kisses him again, then drags Castiel's hands from the ground and places them on his own hips and whispers 'c'mon, you can do it for me, too,' an order that Castiel has no trouble obeying.

Gabriel hisses out a 'yes, yes!' and jerks forward into Castiel's hands and absently Castiel wonders when Gabriel has done this before, and with who, but then Gabriel is biting at his neck and stroking him with one hand and tugging at his wing's feathers with the other, and Castiel cannot help but lose his thoughts and arch up into the purely physical sensations.

Distantly, distantly he thinks that this is a sin, something they shouldn't be doing, something that *Gabriel* shouldn't know how to do, but Gabriel is looking into his eyes as they kiss again, and all Castiel can think then is that Gabriel is *old*, and of course he knows what to do, and of course it is alright.

Gabriel crooks his fingers and flicks the tip of Castiel's cock and pumps him several more times and Castiel finds release with a muffled cry, lost to the pleasure, and it isn't long before Gabriel is crying out and finding his own release.

Castiel hasn't the control Gabriel has over his own Grace, and so he lights up his body almost as if he were dying, and then he is fading, faded back to normal. Gabriel lies him back against the ground gently and with a touch of power cleans them both. "Castiel," He whispers, but he knows Castiel can hear him clearly. "Tell no one that I was here, or of what he did here. They will not approve of this."

And with that they are clothed again and Gabriel is flying, flying out of Heaven.

Gabriel doesn't go directly to Earth from there, warping reality instead to visit one creature he has studied from afar as best he could from Heaven.

Those other creatures, those who might have created reality and Earth, who might have created humans, but Gabriel cannot tell them who has the right to creation, as they have

existed as long as his own Father has, if not longer.

Angels respect pagan Gods, for they too have created the world, and no angel will ever know which pantheon has the truth of it, only that they are all creators and forces onto themselves. (It is one of the eternal mysteries of Creation - for who created it all, when there are many different Gods who can lay claim to it, have proof for it and so the question remains unanswered.)

Gabriel seeks out a place in Earth yet not part of it, and he lands there with the rustle of wings and the sound echoes in the darkness.

There is only one place with light that he can see. A slab of stone, a woman, a snake, a man bound with the entrails of his son.

Gabriel approaches, and the snake on its stalactite holds its venom at his approach. The woman carries her cup and empties it, then waits quietly as Gabriel watches the man.

"Loki," Gabriel greets.

"Gabriel," Loki returns the greeting.

They study each other. Gabriel has a question and a proposal and he needs Loki to understand if he is to agree. Loki has his own questions, for why would one of those distant arrogant angels of the Lord visit a pagan such as he? (Not that Loki is humble in regards to angels, oh no. While they may be dangerous in groups, and while certain angels may be strong enough to match power with him, he remains confident that he can outwit what he cannot fight.)

"Why are you here, angel?" Loki asks, after a long silence.

"I want to hide," Gabriel answers. "And you are known as a Trickster."

Loki makes a sound of disgust, laughing at him. "Hide, really?" He doesn't believe that Gabriel would want to hide, would even *need* to hide. "Oh, you're serious, aren't you?"

"I'm not asking you to hide me from my Father," Gabriel says. "Only the rest of my family." He's calm as he asks, too calm, and he knows exactly what he is asking Loki to do for him.

Gabriel sees it the moment Loki understands, truly understands what Gabriel is asking.

"I'd be a fool if I told you yes," he says.

"I'm certain you can see any number of benefits," Gabriel says, equally neutral in tone. "And I need a teacher, not just a...human vessel."

For a long moment they are silent, as Loki puts pieces together and as Gabriel watches him think it all through. Gabriel takes a moment to note Loki's physical features, to wonder what it would be like to wear them, and he also takes a moment to consider his plans if this one fails.

He has only one strong conviction that he will not bend any plan for at any cost: Gabriel will not return to Heaven.

Perhaps Loki can see it in his eyes, then, as Loki slips out of his bindings as if they were

never there. "I'm going to need you to make some binding oaths to me, Gabriel."

"You can't trust me at my word?" Gabriel asks, surprised for a moment.

"Would you trust *me* at my word?" Loki asks, and for a long moment Gabriel wants to say yes, wants to say that he could trust this God. But Gabriel can see it in Loki's eyes and face and grin that no, he could never trust Loki at his word. He shakes his head in a silent admission.

"And now that you understand that at least," Loki says as he spreads his hands, "You're going to need to explain more to me, as I'll need to know what exactly we're evading here, and I'm going to explain exactly what terms apply if you use me as a vessel."

"I have several terms as well," Gabriel says, nodding, eyes sharp in the darkness. He knows what game he's playing now, and he can throw off any hesitations now that Loki is playing with him.

"Oh?" Loki's eyes are equally sharp.

"We're not to kill any angels. Harm, yes, but we may not kill my family. I will suffer no more deaths of theirs from my hands." Gabriel knows why he is running, hiding, after all. "Understood?"

"I understand," Loki says. He doesn't need to voice that he wouldn't let Gabriel kill any of his kin, and if their situations were reversed he say the same thing. If they must kill families, then let them decide on the terms. "Anything else?"

"I am not returning to Heaven. If I am found, we leave and hide deeper. I *will not* return there."

"That's what you're asking for in the first place, Gabriel. That's not an additional condition," Loki says. "Yes, I can do that." At Gabriel's nod he grins and leans forward. "Now, let's get my terms straight."

And Gabriel listens, and they bargain, but what it comes down to is this: Gabriel has a vessel, one that will not be watched by the eyes of Heaven, and Loki has an opportunity and Gabriel's word that he will be allowed to use it.

Gabriel makes his oath with words and on his Father's name, but as angels do not bleed without flesh, he cannot make his oath with blood. Loki makes his oath with blood and the words 'yes, you may use me as a vessel', and then there is Light in the darkness.

The woman turns her head away. The snake does the same.

When they look back Gabriel and Loki are gone, and so the woman sets down her bowl and sits, waiting with the snake in the dark.

Castiel says nothing about his encounter with Gabriel, but promises himself that he will say something if he is asked.

It takes Heaven nine full days before any angel realizes that Gabriel is missing, thanks to Gabriel's already eccentric habits and planning.

To no one's surprise, Uriel is assigned to finding Gabriel.

Castiel says nothing for nine days before Uriel asks each garrison member in private where they saw Gabriel last.

Uriel questions him in a private sparring room, and they sit next to each other on one of the benches lining the walls as they talk.

"When did you last see Gabriel?" Uriel asks without any preamble. Castiel doesn't know what he's expecting: a story, a location, anything.

He answers as best he can, for now he can break Gabriel's order, surely Gabriel will understand if he ever finds out.

"Nine days ago, while I was on patrol in Araboth," Castiel answers. "One of the long portions of the border that has no walls," He adds unnecessarily. He doesn't look at Uriel, but instead studies the mirrors along the opposing walls and at the patterned tiling on the floors and his hands. He doesn't know what Uriel is thinking.

Castiel thinks of what Gabriel's hands felt like on his face and neck. It's the wrong time and place for these memories, but he cannot help but feel the ghostly memory-sensations of Gabriel's hands.

Uriel makes a noise and Castiel jerks his head up and meets Uriel's eyes, willing the memories to leave him. Uriel holds his gaze for a long moment before speaking.

"It was more than that," Uriel says, and Castiel has to break eye contact and look down. "You spoke with him?"

Castiel gives a mute nod, studying his fingers once more and remembering how he was asked to touch *back* and how he did.

"What did he say, Castiel?" Uriel asks, and from his tone Castiel knows that Uriel is aware that his meeting with Gabriel was significant in some way. Castiel…doesn't exactly want to share all of what happened.

Castiel is aware that he probably needs to.

"I was not to tell anyone that he was there," Castiel says quietly. "He did not want to deal with 'this'. With me."

He doesn't look at Uriel as it sinks in for the both of them that Castiel was probably the last angel in Heaven to see Gabriel before he left. He doesn't look at Uriel, knowing that Uriel will ask for more.

Castiel thinks of how Uriel is known for his somewhat close relationship with Gabriel, of how they spar together on a regular basis. He thinks of how Uriel admires the archangel, and he thinks of the withering shame he felt as he finished his patrol that night.

"Castiel," Uriel says, and here it comes: "What else happened?"

If Castiel flinches a little bit it is not because of fear.

"Castiel," Uriel repeats, but he does not repeat the question again. He lets it hang in the air, and it is clear that he is waiting for a response.

Oh, but Castiel doesn't want to tell him.

The silence stretches before Castiel shakily meets Uriel's eyes and tells him quietly and quickly what happened: "Gabriel told me that he would make it easier on me. He told me to come closer. He touched me. It felt good." He stops to take in a sudden breath, even if needs it not. He can't keep looking at Uriel's eyes and drops his gaze. "He told me that I would thank him for it later. That I might understand. He...didn't stop touching. We. I. I *knew* him, Uriel, and I. I didn't stop him." Castiel's hands are gripping his knees, and he begins to register that he is hurting himself. He loosens his hands with effort and finishes. "He told me not to tell anyone. Because they would not approve. Then he left."

Castiel cannot look at Uriel. He cannot look to see how Uriel is reacting, and he closes his eyes, feeling the shame burning through him. He should have stopped Gabriel, he should have been stronger, but he remembers how good it felt even through the shame and he knows that few in Heaven would understand.

He feels a weight on his shoulder, suddenly, and he jerks his head up to look. There is Uriel, awkward and stiff and hiding so, so many of his feelings regarding Gabriel as Castiel sees pity in Uriel's eyes. There is sympathy, too, and that is why Uriel's hand is on his shoulder.

"Castiel," Uriel says after a moment, his voice rough. "I am. Sorry that you flew that patrol that night."

Castiel says nothing, looking back at his hands.

"You should know something," Uriel says, and Castiel wonders *what* he is missing, what could possibly explain some of this to him? It is a moment of irrational anger that he stifles quickly.

Uriel clears his throat and starts again.

"Before Lucifer Fell, he...often cornered angels and did what you described to them. I have...suspected that Lucifer once did the same to Gabriel."

"You said nothing," Castiel says, but it's not a question, he knows why. Uriel answers him regardless.

"It was only a suspicion, Castiel, and you know what Gabriel is."

"Yes," Castiel whispers. "I do."

Uriel pulls his hand back after a silent minute, and Castiel raises his head. "Castiel?"

"Yes?"

"I will be joining you on your patrols," Uriel says, and stands. Castiel doesn't understand his tone, but he understands the clear dismissal. He stands and leaves the sparring room, leaving Uriel alone.

Gabriel has become used to the sensation of the Trickster's method of transportation by now, and he has become used to the new sensations he feels with a body of flesh and blood.

He has not become used to bleeding at all, however. This body of his will rip and tear with anything more than a gentle blow, and he is not yet accustomed to letting his Grace strengthen it: he is too wary to use his own Grace much at all, not when he can feel his kin searching the Earth for him.

Loki has lent him his power, for a few hundred years or so, or 'until you've figured out how to make your own source be like mine enough to fool anyone' and Gabriel is at once grateful for the boon and yet almost clumsy when he uses it.

Loki's brand of magic is nothing like the bright fire that is Grace, and it has echoes that are foreign to Gabriel, and so he has spent long days in solitude simply feeling how it flows through Loki's body and how it interacts with reality.

He spends time near pools of water, and feels how his own natural inclination towards the element draws him closer and how controlling the element feels less like giving it direction and more like flowing along its path as he decides where it goes - the differences are subtle but important and Gabriel intends to master them so that no angel or being on Earth may discover what and who he truly is.

There are other lessons as well: Loki teaches Gabriel geography, as Gabriel is a creature of the air and so navigating without rising up into the air is difficult for him. Loki teaches Gabriel his modes of speech, his little mannerisms and everything Gabriel needs to know to *become* Loki as well as he can.

Gabriel demands that they hide and wait when he feels his brothers pass by overhead and Loki demands that they travel incognito so that his pantheon will not have opportunity to uncover Gabriel.

They are learning each other and they are hiding and they are not discussing what the future will hold (for Loki will want Gabriel to play tricks and he will want Gabriel to kill humans casually, for it is what he does and part of what he is) and most of all they are not discussing their pasts with each other beyond anything more than a need to know basis. (For then Loki might push Gabriel to get used to murdering humans sooner, as Gabriel is surely accustomed to that act from his last extended trip to Earth?)

Gabriel never says it but he is grateful for Loki's presence and understanding, but at times he will realize that Loki is directing their travel in paths that lead him to water and he knows that the Trickster understands what he does not say.

"Gabriel," Loki says in Gabriel's thoughts, "Tonight we're eating *something* that's not from a bush or a tree."

"Can I have mushrooms, then?" Gabriel asks, but he knows what the answer is already. Loki doesn't need to eat, but habits are habits and Gabriel is discovering that the sensation of taste is one that he enjoys most of the time.

"I want meat, Gabriel," Loki says, tone stern. "Freshly killed and then roasted over a fire." (For Loki can taste the food as well and perhaps in the coming years he won't be so vocal about what Gabriel does in his body, but for now he makes his demands and Gabriel

simply obeys.)

"I really don't want to," Gabriel says, but he's standing up from where he was sitting against the tree and brushing himself off.

He raises his eyes and looks around, searching the woods by sight, noticing how Loki's powers sharpen his senses when he focuses like this. There is a squirrel, running down a tall tree, and when Gabriel tilts his head Loki gives him a firm 'no, not unless there's truly nothing else here. Look for hare, for deer or anything other than the smaller creatures.'

"Fine, fine," Gabriel mutters, and he begins to walk, senses still sharp as he sees the squirrel run back up the tree as he passes, senses still sharp as a flock of birds pass overhead, the sound of wings nearly deafening to his ears.

The sound of wings makes him flinch for different reasons than sharpened hearing, however, and it takes a moment for Gabriel to calm himself before he can go on.

"If that's going to keep happening, we should follow those birds," Loki comments quietly.

"Be quiet," Gabriel mutters, annoyed at his fear, annoyed at his task and most of all annoyed at how there are quite simply no suitable creatures within his immediately vicinity.

Loki chuckles and is silent as Gabriel follows the path that he had been directed to follow earlier, and for a short while Gabriel hears nothing but the sound of his body and the sound of the forest.

Minutes pass, and multiply and then *there*, at a distance in a thicket is a lone deer, ears flicking as it hears him passing.

Gabriel asks Loki without words if this is the kind of meal he wants, and Loki tells him yes.

Loki also tells him not to use his powers for anything more than speed and strength, for he wants Gabriel to catch it and kill it without cheating.

Again without words Gabriel tells Loki that he is unfair and annoying but these are empty complaints and already Gabriel is lengthening his stride and approaching the deer quickly.

Its head goes up, its tail follows, and then Gabriel is forced to run as the deer bounds past trees and through bushes and unfriendly terrain and Gabriel makes himself go faster, makes himself have more stamina and after a silent question he pulls a knife into creation so that he will not have to kill it with his bare hands.

The chase the deer is leading him on is taking him far from the path he meant to follow, but Gabriel finds that he is enjoying the run and the feel of wind blowing past him. He even finds that watching the deer stumble disappoints him, for the chase will soon be over, even if he wants it to continue.

"That's not because you like running that much," Loki mutters in his thoughts. "You just don't want to kill it."

"Be quiet," Gabriel thinks back, and all of a sudden he is upon the deer and driving his knife into its haunches and delivering short cuts that make it bleed.

The deer - doe, he's certain of its gender now - panics and tries to bolt again, but he

drops a hand on its neck and he doesn't need Loki's power to have a grip of iron and the strength to hold it there.

Gabriel drives his knife across its throat in a smooth cut and helps it fall to the ground as it bleeds out.

"And now we need fire," He mutters, sighing. "Poor th-"

"None of that," Loki cuts in. "It's dinner. No pity for dinner."

Gabriel would give Loki a look if they had separate forms but they don't, so he rolls his eyes and heads off to prepare a fire.

It's not the weirdest series of events he's been through on Earth, and it won't be the last, but he can certainly say that he won't forget it. Especially after he got to *taste* the deer.

The first patrol Castiel shares with Uriel begins with a sense of awkwardness that is difficult to work past. Castiel makes himself slow down in his flight to compensate for Uriel's slower speed, and Uriel makes himself speed up to compensate for his tendency to analyze the area in great detail as he flies.

Uriel, needless to say, is not used to flying patrols, not like this. His posts have been as guards, for managing other angels and for fighting, not learning how a stretch of land looks and how best to fly along it for long stretches of time.

There is a span of forty minutes before either of them speaks to each other beyond the basic directions and greetings.

"Castiel," Uriel breaks the silence, watching the ground with occasional glances up at the other angel to assure himself that he is following the correct route. "How have you been faring?"

Castiel gives him a somewhat confused look and Uriel remembers that the question is once again a habit he has picked up from time spent with Gabriel, and the thought leaves him cold.

Castiel answers regardless, and Uriel can hear the confusion in his words. "I am no different from before."

Uriel would laugh, but he doesn't and instead moves closer to Castiel, wings beating at a steady pace to maintain height. "I am attempting to learn more about you, Castiel," He says, for that's what he's here to do.

Castiel wouldn't understand it, won't understand this urge of Uriel's for a while, as Uriel barely understands it himself. Perhaps it's an attempt to make his memories with Gabriel easier to bear, perhaps it's an attempt to help Castiel, perhaps it's an unconscious effort to fill the archangel's role that he left vacant.

"Why?" Castiel asks, then he jerks his head to the side and down. "I'm sorry." They both remember that ages old command from Lucifer and Michael: *Do not question the orders or actions of your superiors*. Uriel learned from Gabriel long ago that Gabriel expected him to break that command around him, and question Gabriel all he wanted to.

It took years before Uriel worked up the nerve to even try.

"Don't apologize," Uriel says, realizing now that here is an opening into explaining some of why he was here to Castiel. "And question anything I do, if you want to. I would prefer it if you do."

That nets him a strange look from Castiel, and then a slow nod.

"Why are you asking me to do this, Uriel?"

"I'd gotten used to it with Gabriel," Uriel says after a moment. "He insisted that I do the same thing, provided I wasn't fool enough to do it when we weren't in private, and provided that I wasn't fool enough to question, say, Michael."

He can see how Castiel tenses at the mention of Gabriel, but he can also see how Castiel nods, understanding the order.

"I cannot think of what Michael would do if we questioned him," Castiel says after a long moment, and when Uriel looks at him there is the hint of a smile. "Or Raphael."

Uriel laughs, once, genuinely. "They are so distant, Castiel," he says. "Were you aware that they are the only angels who have seen the face of God?"

It's not uncommon knowledge, but some angels of the lower orders were never told about it. And from Castiel's expression he has never heard of it.

"No," Castiel says at length. "I was not aware. It explains much."

"Indeed it does," Uriel says. "Those three and Lucifer, and I wonder at how Lucifer could do such a thing when he has been so blessed."

He does, truly, for even angels as strange and strong as they cannot flagrantly defy the laws of existence, and they were so blessed as to be granted an audience with their creator.

Uriel never met Lucifer, and saw him only a few times, and even those glimpses did nothing to explain why such a radiant figure would make choices that would lead him to Fall.

"Uriel," Castiel says after a period of silence. (Silent but for the sound of wings.) "I was not created until after that original war. I have never seen Lucifer in person."

Uriel gave him a look, as if realizing just now that Castiel was one of the younger angels, not simply an angel placed low in the hierarchy. "Curious," Uriel says, and Castiel finds himself wanting to ask what he is thinking about.

"You know what happened, yes?" Uriel asks.

"Of course," Castiel says. "But the knowledge is not memory. I was not there."

It isn't something Uriel thought he would ever say: "I envy you, Castiel."

It isn't something Castiel thought he would ever hear: "What?"

"You've never killed an angel before, have you?" Uriel asks quietly. At Castiel hesitant

shake of his head, Uriel goes on. "I have slain angels before, Castiel. Brothers and sisters who chose to follow Lucifer in his rebellion." Castiel is silent, listening, and again he goes on. "It...the battle changed many of us. Mirael cut down many of the Fallen before he was nearly felled by one he could not kill. Hutriel had been...Mirael had trusted him. If I hadn't been nearby to prevent the blow, there would be one more angel of your age now, Castiel."

"We have been made as warriors." Castiel spreads his wings and goes higher, and Uriel follows. "Even the Cherubim of the lower classes can fight if called to defend themselves."

"I know this."

Castiel ascends still higher, eyes on the ground far below, scanning for any movement ever as it all falls away. "God is said to be all-knowing."

Uriel has no answer, and then Castiel is folding his wings and dropping into a dive, dropping to the ground as fast as he can. It takes a moment for Uriel to see what Castiel is aiming for, and then he sees the movement, the demon far below.

He too folds his wings and drops into a long dive, and he tries to remember if Castiel has ever been forced to fight a demon before. He rarely hears reports of Castiel's patrols being eventful, and this area is known as a quiet border of Heaven.

It doesn't much matter now, however, as Uriel pulls out of his dive early to watch how Castiel handles it.

The demon is an awkward thing, with too many limbs and bulbous in ways that Uriel knows aren't natural. He can see that it's no threat, not to any angel who knows what they're doing, as it has little intelligence, little in the way of powers, and almost no defenses beyond lots of flesh.

This is probably the first time Castiel's killed a demon, Uriel thinks. Not that he's worried - as Castiel said, angels were made for combat.

Castiel doesn't prove him wrong, using the momentum of his dive to drive a suddenly-manifest spear through the demon, pinning it to the ground in one motion, and then Castiel is standing next to the creature and touching it, burning the demonic taint away as he retrieves his spear, and then the spear and the demon are gone, one de-manifested, the other wiped clean and out of existence.

Uriel lands next to him, and Castiel nods to him.

"You were testing me," Castiel says quietly, folding his wings close to his back. "To see if I could handle that."

There's no point in denying it. "I will assist with the next one." Uriel says, and: "We should return to our flight. There will most likely be more of those tonight."

Castiel tilts his head, then unfolds his wings and takes to the sky. After a moment, Uriel follows him.

Gabriel is surprised to find how quickly time on Earth goes by, and he is even more surprised at how much he has yet to experience and try and see and do when Loki

informs him that it has been more than a few hundred years and that he needs Gabriel to give him a couple years of sleep.

"Just a few years," Loki says, and Gabriel admits his curiosity at why Loki would want to lose any of these years to sleep.

The only answer he receives is a quiet "I'm tired, Gabriel, so just do it."

It doesn't take much for Gabriel to figure out what Loki means from there. They've seen Gabriel's originating religion take hold and spread, and they've seen Loki's followers be forcefully prevented from following their faith, and Gabriel understands that it must hurt.

Not that there's much they can do about it, either, so Gabriel stifles Loki, induces a sleep in him so that Gabriel feels alone in his body for the first time in too long, and it takes him a few years to get used to the absence of commentary on everything he does.

It takes him a few years after that to admit that he misses Loki, but as more and more violence spreads through Loki's former lands, Gabriel lets him continue to sleep and he considers the possibility of traveling.

A few years turns into a few dozen. Gabriel wakes him for brief periods for short conversations, but Loki refuses his offers to wake him entirely.

"I was fated to spend the rest of eternity in that prison," Loki tells him. "Until Ragnarok, and it hasn't happened yet. Besides, you're me as well as you can be, and I've earned my rest."

Gabriel tells him that he's getting old.

"So are you," Loki tells him back. "I'll be young again, but not yet. When you feel old, wake me up." And with that Loki stops talking, and Gabriel sends him to rest once more.

This is when Gabriel realizes, truly realizes that this body that he's wearing? It's *his*. This identity that he is? It's *his* and that won't change, not until something happens that forces Gabriel to be Gabriel once again.

Gabriel feels his wings ache from being bound in a human-shaped form for so long and realizes that he need never acknowledge them again. Not until he's forced to.

It's at once terrifying and liberating, and if he makes a decision to *fly* across the ocean to travel, it's his choice. There's no Loki demanding he take a boat, there's no angels hunting him from the sky, and he knows how to approach foreign deities so that they'll let him visit their lands.

He even knows how to hide as he travels - after all, humans aren't likely to pay attention to an albatross flying in odd patterns across the sea, and it's bound to be something new and exciting, and Gabriel's learned to love new and exciting.

Uriel fights demons with twin blades of fire, which is something that Castiel marvels at every time he sees his kin in battle.

Castiel fights with spear when required to close in, but he prefers a longbow and peppering the demons with arrows from the sky. It's at once safer and appropriate for his

strength, for while all angels were made for combat, not all angels were made equally in terms of strength.

Uriel's spoken to him about that. Uriel's spoken to him about a lot of things, as he's assigned himself to joining Castiel's patrols until further notice.

The excuse he uses to justify the move to Abdiel is that there are more demons these days, and while they are never strong, they are numerous, and so having two angels on patrols is more efficient.

Castiel's already told Uriel that he doesn't need a reason for why Uriel has joined him. He has some ideas, but whatever they are - he feels safer on the patrols with Uriel, and that's worth keeping.

"Watch," Castiel says, and he shows Uriel how he does the looping turn once more. It feels strange, to be teaching his superior how to fly better, but it seems that Uriel truly does need the lessons.

Uriel frowns, watching, and flies over to Castiel once he is done. "I will learn it eventually, Castiel."

"Yes, you will," Castiel answers, and he wheels around in the air to steady himself once more as he faces Uriel. "I am...unaccustomed to teaching others how to fly."

"I know the feeling." Uriel's smile is bitter, a bit sad, and Castiel realizes immediately that he is thinking of Gabriel once again.

"Tell me." Castiel has come to appreciate these stories, for Uriel was allowed glimpses of a side the highest angels were rarely allowed to show, and it helps balance what Castiel remembers of Gabriel - he remembers racing Gabriel, he remembers his laughter and strange questions, and he remembers a cold night that still causes shame to gnaw at him when he remembers how *gooa* it felt.

Uriel's stories help bridge those two encounters in his mind, and are often entertaining, and so Castiel watches Uriel, waiting.

Uriel sighs after a moment, then nods.

"Gabriel lacked...control over fire," He says, thinking back. "He had a difficulty with making it go where he wished with his blade."

"Truly?" Castiel asks, for that is an image all angels are left with: only the highest angels may wield swords of flame, and only those original four archangels wield the most impressive swords of flame. It is strange to think of one of those four having difficulties with the fire.

"I can show you." Uriel unsheathes one of his swords and lights a fire along it, running fingers down the blade as he does so. Fire blooms over it, pressed close to the blade but not touching it, and Castiel can see how it is controlled. "Gabriel's fires were...less controlled," Uriel says, and then the fire is flaring out, losing that control, larger and unrestrained. "Like this."

He makes sure that Castiel sees it, and then the fire is gone and he is sheathing his sword

once more. "Do you understand?"

"Yes," Castiel says, and he is wondering. "Why would that happen?"

"It's due to how strong he was," Uriel murmurs. "When he explained the difficulty to me, he bade me go stand under a waterfall and attempt to direct its flow from there."

"...ah," is all Castiel has to say to that. He can picture it, and he can only guess at how strong one would have to be to have that happen. "How did you two solve this?"

"Gabriel has an affinity for water, and so used it to subtly surround the flames, corralling them." Uriel shrugged. "He still requested that I attempt to teach him better control over fire, due to my skill with it."

"Like you are requesting my teachings now for flight," Castiel finishes, and Uriel nods.

"Exactly. We all excel in different areas. There is a general...uneven-ness to it, but there are ways to compensate. Castiel, show me that turn again. I'm going to try attempting it this time."

Castiel gives him a look, then nods and flies, showing the turn.

Uriel tries it and doesn't complete it nearly as quickly or as smoothly as Castiel does, but he's smiling when he's done with it, and if Castiel were asked, he would say that the rest of the patrol has a lingering sense of accomplishment, even if they found no demons crossing the border at that time.

Gabriel finds himself in North America at the turn of the century (the new millennium, even!), and he finds himself in New York City.

It's not the strangest place he's wound up at after a particularly...exciting party. He did start in Vienna, Austria, but the party back when the years ticked over to the eighteen-hundreds got him to circle the globe not once but twice, so all in all it's one of his calmer years.

It still baffles him how two-thousand years passed by so quickly, but he can't say he regrets any moment of it. Well, he might regret how a few affairs fell out, but that was beyond his control, right?

Right. So Gabriel finds himself in New York City, in some posh apartment, and it's a testament to how drunk he was that it's only now that the stench of *demon* slams into his brain like a freight train.

If anything, it makes the hangover worse. Thank the good lord for snap-quick cures.

Gabriel sits up from the couch he's crashed on and tries to remember exactly what he was up to the night before. Besides partying.

Not much comes to his mind, so instead he inventories what clothes he's wearing, and what kind of apartment he's in. His outfit is surprisingly bland: a cream-colored suit with excellent tailoring, even if he's creased most of it and the tie is askew. Gabriel would almost be afraid of this mark of a boring night, but the tie is an eye-popping neon pink, purple and green, and his socks are equally eye-scarring. There's also lipstick (blue?

whatever color it is, it's not red) on his collar and in his pockets are packets of seeds (for flowers!) a few dog treats and three business cards with numbers to India scratched on their backs.

He'd almost have to declare it an uneventful night, were it not for the death threats taped to the business cards.

Inventory finished, he stands up and comes nose to nose to an invisible dog.

"Huh," Gabriel says. It takes a moment. "Hellhound?" He would never mistake that scent of brimstone and doggy-ness.

An invisible tongue licks him, and that if nothing else confirms it: where the slobber hits his suit, his suit begins to *melt*. Good thing Gabriel's near-invincible, or else his skin would follow suit.

"*Down*, boy." He says, and with a snap of his fingers his suit is pristine again.

Hellhounds: Invisible unless viewed from the right angle, giant and nearly impossible to kill, with acidic slobber, and horribly affectionate when not otherwise ordered to hunt, maim and kill.

Gabriel's met about one demon on Earth who keeps them around, and it explains why he's in a suit, why he's in New York, and it tells him exactly who is clearing his throat in a disapproving manner from the doorway.

"That's Edith, actually," Crowley says, and Gabriel flashes him a bright, blinding grin.

"It's not like I can see her," Gabriel says as there's a rushing of air as Edith leaves him for Crowley. "Good morning, unspeakable hellspawn!"

"That's good evening to you," Crowley pats his pup on the head and comes further into the room. "You've been unconscious on my couch for two days."

Gabriel blinks, and had to reassess the party: it was certainly better than he'd thought, as he rarely found drinks potent enough to truly knock him out for long. "Huh."

"Tell me one thing," Crowley says, after a pause. "How did you manage to wind up that far underwater? Several of my employees were...surprised to find a man-shaped object interrupting their studies of the Mariana Trench."

"You have employees underwater?"

"I have expensive equipment underwater, with employees deciphering what it is that my equipment finds down there. It's a side project. But that is besides the point. What exactly was your drunken mind trying to find down there?"

And now Gabriel remembers that bit of it: "I remembered that there were creatures down there with crazy lighting, and you know how impulsive I am when liquored up to the gills." He shrugged good-naturedly and grinned. "So that's how I got here."

"And now that you're awake," Crowley says, gesturing at the door with the drink suddenly in his hand. "You can go."

"And leave you here all alone?"

"*Yes.* I have an appointment to meet with one of my assistants, and other assorted tasks that need doing, all of which I am certain would bore you to tears. I suggest you leave."

"I'm getting breakfast first." Gabriel declares, and without another word he zips off to Crowley's kitchen.

Uriel stands before Abdiel's desk and does not speak as the orders are delivered:

"Uriel, it's beginning to come around to the time we've all been waiting for, and your garrison's gotten the luck of the draw." Abdiel is far, far too pleased with himself, and that means only one thing to Uriel: troubling news was on hand.

He says nothing, however, quietly letting Abdiel drop the bombshell that he has. Uriel knows what era it is, and he knows what is coming, but still he does not want to hear it.

"When Dean Winchester gets himself into Hell, your garrison gets to pull him out of there in one piece." Abdiel leans back and watches Uriel, waiting for the reaction.

Uriel thinks of the demons he kills on a more than weekly basis and he nods. "We will be successful." He doesn't speak of the one missing in their ranks, and he wonders why Abdiel has chosen their garrison instead of one with a full compliment of members. (Arariel's...defection had been overly troubling, after all.)

"Of course you will, of course you will." Abdiel stands up. "So congratulations - at least two of you will be called to find vessels and walk upon the Earth. I suggest you start drawing lots to see who gets to speak with the cherubim. And you're dismissed."

Uriel doesn't like Abdiel's smile. "Understood," he says, and leaves. They have years yet before the actual attack on Hell, and years yet before Dean Winchester falls that far, but the number of years remaining has dwindled to less than a decade.

It's soon, and he wonders if it's far too soon, but he has no way of knowing, and no way of asking for answers.

Gabriel spends two more days lounging around Crowley's apartment, playing fetch with the pup and eavesdropping as much as he can on Crowley's phone calls. (He rather likes how one of Crowley's assistants, Oliver, sounds. Perhaps someday he'll drop in on the fellow and find out exactly what he does for Crowley.)

Crowley...tolerates his presence.

It's a grudging toleration, and one that Gabriel knows is pushing every single time he drops a vase from an open window onto specific targets far below, (the apartment *is* sixty floors up, you know, and he has a reputation as a Trickster to maintain) but overall he hasn't crossed the line that would lead to Crowley siccing Edith on him.

Yet. Gabriel has to laugh to himself when he figures out what exactly he wants to do to Crowley, and he's still chuckling to himself as he finds Crowley reclining on his expansive bed, on the phone with someone Gabriel doesn't care about.

Gabriel watches him from the doorway for a moment, as he's never invaded Crowley's bedroom before, and speaking of things he's never encountered before, Crowley in a bathrobe counts as something he's never seen before.

Crowley looks up at him and quirks an eyebrow, but doesn't react otherwise and then Gabriel is crossing the room, pausing to step around Edith's sleeping form (there are ways to tell where an invisible dog is specifically, and Gabriel's mastered them) before Gabriel is flopping next to Crowley on his bed, and my but the bed is comfortable.

Gabriel thinks briefly of just dropping off into a comfortable rest here (he only sleeps when drunk or when bored enough to try it, really) but no, he knows what he wants, and that's to get Crowley out of his silk bathrobe.

While a snap of his fingers could solve that problem in a jiffy, there is something to be said for doing things the normal way, and so Gabriel rolls over, pressing up against Crowley's side and not really listening as Crowley hurries up and finishes his call.

The moment Gabriel unknots the soft belt and slips a hand under the silk, Crowley ends the call, and barely seconds later Crowley has placed a hand on his wrist in a grip that threatens to become bone-breakingly strong if Gabriel continues his explorations.

"Oh, come now." Gabriel says. "You'll enjoy it and you know it."

"You," Crowley takes in a breath, and Gabriel knows a spiel is coming. "Are irritating, overly immature, lacking in any common sense whatsoever, and additionally you - "

Gabriel, if he may brag a bit, thinks it's one of the best interruptions he's ever managed to pull off. A quiet snapping of his fingers and Crowley's boxers are gone, and that left Gabriel free to slide down and take Crowley's cock into his mouth.

Surprise blowjobs are something Gabriel needs to try more often, he thinks.

Crowley looks down at him to glare, but he's already hard and Gabriel knows what he's doing and so the glare just doesn't have its usual potency. Gabriel chuckles and abuses his powers to remove his gag reflex, and then he is taking Crowley's cock as deep into his mouth as he can.

"You're...still lacking in common sense," Crowley manages from above, stifling moans with an audible effort, and Gabriel just hums, working his tongue and lips while he rests his hands on Crowley's hip and stomach.

He's never sucked a demon off before, to be honest. Sure, he's given men blowjobs before, but to taste the taint through the skin as he works is something new and altogether thrilling. Gabriel reminds himself that if he ever manages to get Crowley to reciprocate, he'll need to work out some kind of ward so he prevents any possibility of purifying the demon on accident. (Wouldn't that just be awful - have a wonderful climax only to come down to realize that you've purified your lover and so prevented any chance of it happening again...Gabriel's a practical hedonist, after all.)

Gabriel would have to say that he kind of likes how Crowley tastes, even with the taint behind his skin, and he likes the sounds Crowley makes when he flicks his tongue *just* so, and most of all he likes how Crowley puts his hands in his hair and holds on tight. It'd hurt if Gabriel wasn't nearly invincible, and the thought of Crowley being able to hold onto him with as much strength as he can muster sends a thrill of arousal through Gabriel's body.

Gabriel bobs his head several times, lets Crowley's tip slip free from his mouth exactly once and gets back to sucking when Crowley *growls* at him to stop playing and get on with it, damnit!

Gabriel can't help but laugh and do as Crowley says, taking him deep into his mouth once again and savoring the taste once more. He moves his tongue from there, and watches Crowley's face as he tenses in that moment before release, clearly lost to the sensations, and then Crowley is coming hard down Gabriel's throat.

Gabriel pulls back a moment later, kissing the tip of Crowley's cock as he goes, and then he clambers up to lie next to Crowley on his side, head propped up on one arm, free hand holding Crowley's cock loosely in his hand. He doesn't know if Crowley's the type to appreciate it, but he does it either way as he watches the demon come back to his senses.

"Was it good, darling?" Gabriel asks with a too-sweet tone, and he laughs when Crowley glares at him.

"Don't think I'm reciprocating now, Trickster," Crowley says, but the glare loses it's entirely malicious edge and if Gabriel were inclined to pry, he'd say that the look is almost fond.

"Maybe later, eh?" Gabriel asks with a smile, chuckling again.

"Perhaps," Crowley answers, sitting up. "I wouldn't object to a repeat performance later, then."

Gabriel lets go of Crowley and rolls onto his back, humming. "I'll make you a deal - you like those, as I recall - I won't expect anything out of you but sex, and you won't expect anything out of me in return. Fair enough?" It's how he likes his affairs, after all. No strings attached, just mind-blowing sex.

Crowley looks at Gabriel with a calculating look in his eyes, and then he is pushing Gabriel over and kissing him, hard and messy and good. There's nothing binding in it, nothing meaningful in it beyond the symbolism. "It's a deal, Trickster."

Heaven prepares for the coming Apocalypse, Hell prepares its snare to capture the Winchesters in its bowels, and Gabriel ignores the ticking clock over his head to the best of his ability for several years.

It's purely by accident that he happens to be in a certain town in Ohio when the Winchesters are close enough to practice their family business on him.

It's surely not Gabriel's curiosity and tendency to poke hornet's nests, and it's surely not the quiet question of what his brother's vessels look like and act like.

Not at all.

Part V.